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<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4796-466X> (2017) The impact of the psychological contract on academics' discretionary effort. In: UfHRD Annual Conference, 7-9 June 2017, Lisbon. (Unpublished)

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# **The impact of the psychological contract on academics' discretionary effort.**

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*Working paper*

## **Abstract**

Discussions around the psychological contract remain a prominent subject amongst the academic literature, however little has focussed on academics themselves. This paper considers the psychological contract of academics and in particular the impact it has on discretionary effort. The research undertaken involved a phenomenological study amongst 18 Business School academics from 9 UK Universities. Data was collected via interview and questionnaire to find meaning from within the construct. Findings suggest that academics have a relational psychological contract and that discretionary effort is internalised and intrinsic, suggesting a high work ethic amongst academics. However the paper raises the question as to whether this internalisation is a result of managerial processes or whether is a free choice. The findings of the paper should be of concern to academics interested in the psychological contract but will also be of interest to line managers and human resource departments within higher education institutions.

**Key Words:** Psychological Contract; Academics; Discretionary Effort;

## **Introduction**

It would be true to say that the Psychological Contract is a well-trodden path. Since Rousseau's (1989) seminal work breathed new life into the construct many commentators have explored it in a range of settings. Much of the research surrounds breach and violation and the impact it has. Freese and Schalk (2008) suggest that the turbulence within organisations in the 1980's and 1990's caused traditional employment relationships to be tested. They claim, along with many others including Cullinane and Dundon (2006), Del Campo (2007) and Herriot et al (1997), that this unrest renewed the contemporary interest in the psychological

contract. This study coincides with significant changes within the UK higher education sector and is therefore timely in relevance. The University Forum for Human Resource Development (UFHRD) 2015 conference proceedings suggested an increasing interest in the study of academics and their institutions. In further support Del Campo (2007 p439) suggests that the psychological contract is “a well-developed, emerging and dynamic area ripe for further research”.

## **Literature Review**

The concept of the Psychological Contract originated with the work of Argyris in the 1960's (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006; Del Campo, 2007; Freese and Schalk, 2008; Herriot et al, 1997; Shen, 2010). Although much credit is given to Argyris (1960) for the beginning of the concept and the use of the term it was actually Levinson et al (1962) who first developed the key ideas of the concept, and in particular he identified the key partners in the relationship, and in particular the importance of the implicit nature of the expectation, which would come to define the psychological contract. It was not until the 1990s, initiated by the writings of Rousseau that it rose to prominence (Cullinane and Dundan, 2006; Freese and Schalk, 2008). Cornelisson and Durand (2014) highlight work of Rousseau in 1989 as a ground breaking contribution. Tookey (2013) however points to the roots of the psychological contract lying with literature on social contracts and organisational equilibrium theory, and also to the work conducted by Menninger (1958) on the relationship between psychotherapists and patients. This builds on the work of Schein (1980) who suggests that the psychological contract is built from the ideas contained within social contracts, and highlights the work of Wraight (2008) in writing about Jean Jacques Rousseau interpretation and discussion of the Social Contract in 1762 in which he interpreted societies interaction with the state. Jardat (2012) in his comparison of the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and of Denise Rousseau highlights significant similarities between the concepts of the social contract and the psychological contract. However he draws on what he defines as a “tectonic fault” (p44) a chasm of difference in that the psychological contract relies on exchange while the social contract is supposed by the concept of sovereignty and the provision of gift.

In particular, Rousseau (1990) identified the breaking points in the relationship and thus a significant change in the psychological contract. This “new deal” (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995) would lead to a rebirth of interest in the Psychological Contract which would result in a plethora of literature in the twenty five plus years that followed. Freese and Schalk (2008) suggest that this rise to the fore came due to the range of organisational changes that have become synonymous within industrial relations between 1980 and 2000. A study by van der Smissen et al (2013), highlighted the frequency of organisational change has both positive and negative effects on the psychological contract, but the nature of the change had little effect. Meanwhile, Kelley-Patterson and George (2001) emphasised that the psychological contract develops as a result of the relationship between the organisation and the individual, which has more recently been supported by Adams et al (2014) who point to Morrison’s (2010) explanation of the psychological contract in which he suggests the psychological contract is “lived and not defined” (p281).

Since this rebirth of interest, two strands have since developed, one following the perspectives of Rousseau (1989, 1990, 1995) who advocates an idiosyncratic approach based on obligations and perceptions, which contrasts with that of Guest (1998) who argues for a more traditional stance and focus on mutuality and reciprocity between the employee and the employer (Del Campo, 2007). Rousseau (1990, p391) defines the psychological contract as “The individual’s belief about mutual obligations, in the context of the relationship between employer and employee.” In stating this definition Rousseau identifies and confirms two key elements relevant to the psychological contract. Firstly, the definition highlights the individualistic nature of the contract which is fundamentally held in the mind (the belief) of the individual, and secondly, the definition identifies the mutuality of obligations that the individual identifies, whether implicit or explicit, and finally the identification of the focus of the relationship between the employer and the employee. An alternative definition supplied by the CIPD (2014) is “the perceptions of the two parties, employee and employer, of what their mutual obligations are towards each other”.

Regardless of the definition the Psychological Contract remains an important area of study as it “provides employees with a mental model of the employment relationship”

(Coyne and Gavin, 2013 p96) or alternatively as Shen (2010, p576) alludes it “fills the perceptual gaps in the employment relationship”, those bits which ‘exist’ but are not written down or presented in an explicit manner. Essentially the psychological contract is at the core of how individuals perform their job role and underpins how they see their relationship with their employer. Put simply, Kasekende et al (2015) argue that the psychological contract explains “individual responses at work” (p834). Changes in the employment relationship have generated suggestions that the psychological contract has generally shifted from being relational to transactional, and this shift creates a workforce which is calculating in nature, self-interested and opportunistic (Rousseau and Schalk, 2000). Fundamentally the nature of the employment relationship will have an effect on the status and nature of the psychological contract.

The importance of the psychological contract as a key element of the employment relationship makes it a key area to study and understand. Tookey (2013) points to the existence of a gap in research of the psychological contract within the academic domain (p41). He does however question the uniqueness of the work of an academic while also pointing to the changing nature of academia over its last 20 years. The academic and in particular how they see their role and career ambitions may influence how they engage with their employer. Further to this Shen (2010, p576) suggests “the psychological contract of university academic employees has not been much considered in the literature.” Nutakki et al (2015) also highlight the limited level of research carried out on the psychological contracts of academics. Thus there is not much known about the content or fulfilment of the psychological for academics. In continuing this discussion Shen (2010) considers whether traditional concepts of the psychological contract apply to University academics. This is supported by Gillespie et al (2001, cited in Shen 2010) who argue that academics have a different psychological contract than other professions.

Rousseau (1989, 1990, 1995) identified two dimensions (along a continuum) to the psychological contract. The first she argued that there existed a relational psychological contract based on mutual dependence, emotional attachment and associated with permanence in the employment status of the individual. Alternatively there existed a transactional psychological contract based on short term

view with focus on the financial transaction and a temporary work status. This model was later revised to include a hybrid or balanced psychological contract (Dabos and Rousseau, 2004) and emphasised the nature of the continuum. Philbeam and Metcalfe (2013) highlight the greater emotional attachment of a relational psychological contract, however they highlight the unlikely event that the psychological contract will ever be found in its purest form suggesting that it is a dynamic process which is likely to be somewhere on a continuum. They further suggest that due to the developmental nature it forms and changes on a regular basis and at all times individuals will have elements of both. A view supported by Makin et al (1996).

Changes in the employment relationship have generated suggestions that the psychological contract has generally shifted from being relational to transactional, and this shift creates a workforce which is calculating in nature, self-interested and opportunistic (Rousseau and Schalk, 2000). Fundamentally the nature of the employment relationship will have an effect on the status and nature of the psychological contract. Shen (2010) suggests that the psychological contract will vary between professions and between organisations. Other writers (Conway and Briner, 2002; Rousseau and Parks, 1993 cited in Shen2010) suggest that part-time and temporary workers will have a psychological contract which differs to that of full-time and permanent workers. Millward and Hopkin (1998) link the relational psychological contract and permanency. Cullinane and Dundon (2006) undertook a critical review of the psychological contract. They suggest that it is difficult to quantify the psychological contract. They highlight that the failure in the psychological contract is not down to management failure but most likely down to the unreal expectations of employees. Tallman (2008) suggests that “psychological contracts are promise based”. Is it? Should this be a combination of promise and interpretation – not what has been promised but what belief has been. This creates a further issue in trust. Robinson (2015) argues that trust is the foundation of both the psychological contract and employee engagement. As the employment relationship has changed so too perhaps have the trust boundaries.

Alternatively, Guest and Conway (2004) suggest the existence of three contracts: Traditional (a long term tenure and long working hours basis); Disengaged (central

life interest with no emotional link to employer basis); Independent (well qualified people who seek high rewards and short tenure) which on the face of it may be considered to clash with the ideas of Rousseau, when we look behind the diagrammatic representation it is apparent that while Guest and Conway's model describes a stable state the model of Rousseau is far more fluid, and that both models rather than contradicting can quite easily co-exist with each other.

Shen (2010) initially suggested that academics would have a relational contract, however there are question marks as to whether academics focus on their relationship with the organisation (or employer) their profession (subject area) or with the Academic. Many studies (Bathmaker, 1999; Hrabok, 2003 cited in Shen, 2010; Gillespie et al, 2001, cited in Shen 2010) support the assumption that academics have a relational contract, however contrary to his initial belief Shen (2010) found the nature to be more transactional. Bathmaker (1999) conducted her study on a 'new' University (converted polytechnic) highlighting the uncertainty and ambiguity in the sector in the 1990's as a detrimental factor in the employment relationships with the institution. She blames the new approach of managerialism for changes in the relationship. She suggested that key issues were related to self-identity and a feeling of staff vulnerability. Her research suggested that the psychological contracts of academics had moved from relational to transactional and transitional, primarily based on a sense of devaluation. Gammie (2006) supported many of the findings of Bathmaker (1999) and identifies a crucial issue as the rise of new managerialism which has engulfed the sector in the past twenty years. He suggests a key underpinning focus was politicised control including the use of the RAE (now REF) and the role of the QAA including the nature of inspectors. Gammie (2006) further argues that this 'increase in control' has resulted in HEIs moving from organic to mechanistic structures, and that in many organisations a shift reducing the academic influence in the decision making process has occurred.

Furthermore, Shen (2010) suggests a range of factors which will impact on the psychological contract of academics including demographic factors (age, gender etc) educational level, teaching or research orientation and their nationality. In addition he also suggests the length of engagement with the organisation will further impact on the psychological contract. Gammie (2006) discusses the role of the academic and

highlights the potential for three job perceptions: Job orientation (focus on reward); Career orientation (focus on advancement); Calling orientation (focus on fulfilling socially use work). Gammie (2006) suggests that academics may fit into all three categories and suggests that this has an impact on their psychological contract. He points to the differences in job titles and the different types of academic contracts particularly the development of 'Teaching Only' contracts and the Teaching Fellow role. Further emphasis can be identified and analysed in terms of the role of Research Assistants and Fellows and the delivery of the curriculum. This may link in with the notion of make or buy organisations (Miles and Snow, 1980) and whether HEIs are attempting to develop and grow their staff. Many suggest that the REF may have distorted this picture. Lucy and Sheehan (1997) suggest that academics see research as the route to career progression. Meanwhile, Vernon (2011, p45) highlights "the casualization of academic labour" as a key issue within higher education.

Crucially to the building of the Psychological Contract is experience, Rousseau and Parks (1993) acknowledge that although the organisation influences and often fuel beliefs, there are many factors that determine the views of individuals, and these are often drawn from past experiences. A critical element of the psychological contract centres around exchange. The exchange process determines the nature of this in terms of the employment relationship, is who is the exchange with, that is who is the employer. Thus the concept of Agency Theory becomes prevalent. The nature of these exchanges, whether transactional, or relational, dictates the contract. An academic may deal with several different agents on a daily basis. How an individual becomes encultured into the organisation will also affect how their psychological contract becomes visibly portrayed. This can be determined by whether they associate with their organisation, professional body or subject field. The basis of Levinson (1995) is continuous and long term (life) employment. Therefore it is questionable as to the interpretation of Levinson and the concept of loyalty. Interestingly, Baruch and Hall (2004) identify a view that transactional contracts are similar regardless of whether they are in academic or the more conventional business arena. Tipples and Krivokapic-Skoko (1997, cited in O'Neill et al 2010) suggest a link between the psychological contract and work environment as a crucial factor for academics. They also identify important concepts such as job



satisfaction, career development, job security and promotion opportunities as key factors as part perceived promises by the university.

Schimmel et al (2013) links the psychological contract to discretionary effort. They suggest that discretionary effort is not recognised by formal reward systems. Therefore discretionary effort may be an intrinsic element linked to an individual's psychological contract which is affected by person-organisation fit, work ethic and motivation. Ramdhony and Francis (2014) questions the existence of independence in discretionary effort and suggests that there is an increase in induced discretionary effort.

Shen (2010) argues that an academics; interpretation of their psychological contract will dictate their participation in their work role. Akin to this, Bathmaker (1999) refers to the 'Janus-faced' role of the university teacher, linking to the different foci academic staff are generally required to have, and suggests it is difficult to motivate academics as the intrinsic is far more powerful than the extrinsic.

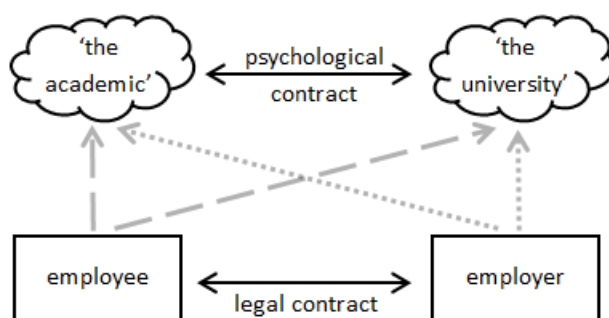


Fig. 1: Academic Psychological contract

### *Criticism and debate*

A key criticism of the psychological contract surfaces through the use of the word contract and the 'legal metaphor' which accompanies it. This raises the discussion around whether it is a contract or not in the true or legal sense. Pesqueux (2012) argues that "the concept of a contract is about will, agreement, obligation, promise, commitment, staying true to one's commitments, cooperation, sanction and bond" (p14) and is at the core of a number of subject disciplines. Although this debate still continues in some quarters, Del Campo (2007) suggests that it is now largely diffused and the term psychological contract is generally universally accepted.

Rousseau (2012 p8) states “free will is an individual’s capacity to make choices without certain constraints: physical, social or personal”. As such it is a construction of the individual and it determined by self and society. From the perspective of the psychological contract free will is a fundamental concept as there is a requirement for the individual to believe that they and who they are contracting with have the ability to do so and critically are making promises. Therefore Rousseau (2012) suggests that free will within the psychological contract is a question of cognitive and emotional issues as without free will there would be no requirement to forgo liberties to keep or uphold commitments, while further to this Pesqueux (2012) suggests that “the notion of the psychological contract is ontologically related to the notion of autonomy” (p30). He also highlights that it would be expected that the psychological contract would be developed through a dialogue between the individual and the agent and as such there may be a development of reciprocity or at least an expectation of it. Ultimately perception plays a significant role. Thomas et al (2003) suggest that the psychological contract is subjective due to both cognitive and perceptual differences of individuals. In addition each individual is also influenced by different source materials which they process differently. Fundamentally they argue that individuals from different cultures will therefore interpret and process information differently and accordingly plays a significant role in the individualistic and subjective nature of the psychological contract. Furthermore human resource practises and expectations differ within different cultures and therefore generate expectations which differ naturally.

Marks (2001) questions the validity of the psychological contract as a construct, suggesting that there is a lack of analytical rigour, and argue it is diminishing as an explanatory framework. In criticising the construct attention is drawn to the legal metaphor, poor definition and an acceptance of questionable convictions. A further criticism relates to the individual-organisation relationship, questioning what is identified as the organisation. Furthermore, Marks (2001) questions the idea of a psychological contract and points to the idea of multiple psychological contracts, suggesting that rather than having a relationship with the organisation, individuals have relationships with different parts of the organisation with which they engage thus holding psychological contracts with each part. The agency problem (Guest,

1998) therefore suggests that an individual perceives the organisation in a variety of guises and holds a psychological contract with each of them. Alongside this Pesqueux (2012) notes that the concept of agency contains the ability of the individual to make their own decisions. He articulates the notion of free will as a lay aspect plus the delegation of authority and control. As such he suggests that agency is a crucial aspect in understanding the relationship between an individual and their organisations.

Research found that the psychological contract is not necessarily idiosyncratic, rather that there is shared uniformity and mutuality between co-workers. However they found that “personal dispositions” (Tallman, 2008 p216) play a key role. Interestingly the research found that employers emphasised obligations of employees and provided punishment and reward systems to enforce them. However they were less forthcoming about their obligations to employees.

### *Research Questions*

What is the nature and content of the psychological contract for academics at UK Higher Education Institutions?

To what extent does the psychological contract influence the level of discretionary effort applied by academics?

### **Methodology**

The research adopted an inductive approach (Bryman and Bell, 2011) through the collection of data and the development of theory. Although there has been a plethora of literature on the subject of the psychological contract there has been no definitive interpretation of the nature and content of the psychological contract for academics in the UK, therefore this research is theory building rather than theory testing (Easterby-Smith et al, 2012). That said Saether (1999) would argue that the process is not pure inductive but is rather retroductive as elements of theory does exist but perhaps not in the context of the study focus.

The study follows a phenomenological research design (Cresswell, 2014) to investigate the experience of a number of academic staffs experience of and interpretation of the psychological contract, making use predominantly of a qualitative approach, although each participant completed a questionnaire alongside the individual interviews. Similar to this Guercini (2014 p670) discusses the notion of the “hybrid methodology in management”, the combining of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies which allows researchers to be distant and objective while investigating the detailed and rich nature of organisations. Target groups have been be categorised as pre-1992 university, post-1992 university former polytechnic and post 1992 former College of HE. Three institutions per category were targeted with a target of two respondents per institution. In total 18 interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Each interview was combined with the relevant questionnaire to produce a case record for each individual participant. Open coding was used to identify key themes. After initial reading additional re-reading took place in line with a constant comparative model (Thomas, 2013) linking findings to key elements of the phenomenon. Participants were lecturers and senior lecturers at nine HEIs across the UK. Participants for the study were selected via a purposive sampling strategy, while also making use of convenience sampling (Avramenko, 2013). The research made use of semi-structured interviews, following conventional practice (Alvesson and Ashcroft, 2012) starting with broad questions which focussed and narrowed into the topic.

The structure of the case records has meant that analysis can be undertaken at a range of levels. Firstly and as a fundamental aspect of the research the data can be viewed at an individual level, and this can subsequently be used to develop a picture (although minimal) at institution level, category level and sector level.

## **Findings**

Findings have so fr been analysed from 9 of the 18 respondents, however clear findings have started to develop. Of the respondents thus far analysed two were female and the rest male, and all respondents were senior lecturers, and the full range of age groups were covered although 3 of the 9 were in the 50-59 age category. Interestingly four out of the nine respondents had previously worked within

an FE style environment, while three had had jobs outside of education prior to entering the profession. Similarly four out of the nine had come to education late and studied for undergraduate or masters degrees as a mature and part time student. This in itself has notably had an impact on their approach to education and there approach to it.

Results suggest that there are shared expectations of and by academics and understand the importance of the role. However respondents from the post 1992 institutions highlight the significant growth in managerialism and pressures from within to become more research orientated has led to changes in the employment relationship, which has become more target driven and output orientated, away from teaching and learning. Although similar findings are evident in the pre1992 institutions these were less extreme or seemed to have less of an impact. That said however the findings suggest that although there is general feeling of organisational fit from the respondents there is a general feeling that there is no synergy between institutions and personal expectations as all have a minor deficit (or neutral) in the link between theirs expectations and what the university provides. That said however academics' values and attitude seem to be influenced significantly by their institution. This is particularly emphasised by the academics from within post 92 ex-colleges where the institutions have had a particular background / ethos which has grown from historic connections to religion and education. In particular the previous Colleges of HE all have a church foundation at the base of their existence.

At an individual level academics feel they have a significant level of autonomy and are supported at an emotional level. That said however there was a feeling amongst two of the academic the belief that they had been let down by the institution in the past and as such were feeling somewhat disenchanted. This led to less of an association with the organisation and generally a less positive view of the future. There was also a general feel that individual expectations were less supported and that this was due to the organisation expecting them to fit with organisational goals and ambitions rather than pursue their own. However in the interviews all respondents felt comfortable that they were being allowed to pursue their own career desires and as such although there was a need to fit within the organisations plan they did have scope to achieve that in several ways. Interestingly all the staff

identified teaching as a priority and crucial to their role, however some place a significant emphasis on research. This was more common amongst pre 1992 institutions, however staff across the board described research as a fundamental aspect to their role. Four out of the nine had doctorates with the rest working towards, so all respondents were research active, although respondents from outside of the pre1992 institutions were less likely to have published in academic journals, although all had produced and presented conference papers. Although most academics put the amount of time spent on administration on a par with research, there was generally a feeling of resentment towards the amount of administration they are expected to do.

All academics were members of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) with 50% having professional accreditation, however only 33% were members of academic bodies related to their subject area. Alongside this the all respondents felt affinity with their department (or school) followed by their subject area and organisation with profession being the least of the organisations they feel affinity towards.

All respondents put in effort above and beyond the basic contractual requirements, however none particularly identified this as discretionary effort, rather seeing it as part of the job. In particular they discussed going the extra mile to support students, colleagues and to undertake their research. Less common was examples of doing extra and putting in extra effort for administrative tasks, although there was some examples given of the need to put in extra time for completion of documents for validations etc. Common examples of discretionary effort with students consisted of providing additional tutorials, meetings outside of normal working hours, trips and events and providing additional support, while examples of putting in extra effort to support colleagues included covering classes, reviewing papers and providing feedback. A significant amount of time was also spent by staff undertaking their research. All staff identified that there were 'not enough hours in the day' and therefore the majority of research was conducted at home and during the evening or weekend. However, none of the academics interviewed argued against this, as they saw this as an expectation of the job. In essence academics did not identify with a set number of hours per week, rather with a set number of contact hours.

## **Discussion**

The research undertaken suggests a relational psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989) still exists and despite the changes in the levels of managerialism and control features that have come to be more prominent in the sector individuals still maintain a high level of autonomy in their individual roles. Thus far it seems that the level of oversight has still not had as yet, as large an impact on the psychological contract as it may have had. Academics still feel and need a relationship with a collective body, although that may be recognised more with a department / school. Subsequently the strength of the relational contract may be weaker than it once was and can certainly be identified differently with different agents within the organisation, supporting Marks' (2001) notion of multiplicity. In essence academics will have different psychological contracts with a range of different individuals and sections within the organisation. In particular, the notion that living the psychological contract, which Morrison (2010) proposed and the concept that it moves over time is supported in that each academic will have a fluid psychological contract. Alongside this, the influence that organisations have on values and attitudes can be evidenced (Rousseau and Parks, 1993) through the data, however past experience has had a positive influence on the role of individuals through previous experience in further education and within the business sector, and in some cases the route they have taken to get there. There is evidence within the research that two of the academics may have experienced breach and violation and thus the psychological contract has been damaged through the experience they have recently encountered. Despite all this the academics still have a positive direction towards students and their role in carrying out research.

Alongside this Cullinane and Dundon's (2006) view that employees tend to have unrealistic expectations, although in general may be correct, academics seem to have broader understanding of their role as something other than a time defined role, however they articulate the growth of managerialism and the increase in administration as a negative in the relationship. That said however academics seem to accept the administrative burden when it is linked directly to teaching, however seem to reject administration which appears more to be about monitoring and checking on performance and targets.

The research would seem to suggest that discretionary effort is a fundamental aspect of the psychological contract of academics and supports Schimmel et al's notion that it is an internalised and intrinsic element. Critically it seems that it predominantly fits with how academics see their role and subsequently suggests academics having a high work ethic for what they see as academic work. A key element of this however would question whether there is an element of induced discretionary effort as suggested by Ramdhony and Francis (2014). Subsequently this raises the question of how much free will actually has, and significantly whether this is a consequence of managerialism which has infiltrated the academic mindset.

## **Conclusion**

The psychological contract remains a concept and construct of debate and research. It is crucial in gaining an understanding of how the people we manage, work with and work for behave in a given range of circumstances. Critically while much has been written about it in the context of the private sector, and a little about public sector, there has been very little written and published reflecting on academia. What there is, is subsequently focussed on breach and violation without really grasping the content and nature of the psychological contract of academics. This therefore provides a grounding for how we may open up a further channel for research and debate.

In particular there is evidence to suggest that academics holistically are self-motivated individuals who are tolerant of organisational pressures and attitudes as a trade-off for autonomy and flexibility. In particular academics hold several psychological contracts with different agents of the organisation and as such are flexible in their demands and expectations of their employers, and subsequently identify more with their department or school rather than the institution.

In support of the theory, discretionary effort is an intrinsic driver within academics who have internalised the process but there is room for debating whether or not this has been constructed through managerialism or whether free will has held prominence.



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